

## **Sociology and Beyond**

### **An Interview with Elemér Hankiss**

**By Máté Zombory<sup>1</sup>**

Being a genuine East Central European intellectual, the field of interest of Elemér Hankiss (1928-2015) has never been restricted to institutional and disciplinary borders of scholarship. Working between the worlds of literature, political science, sociology, and philosophy, even between scholarship and politics, Hankiss has always been interested in great questions of human existence. By the 1980s he was an institutionally acknowledged scholar in Hungary (between 1996-1998 he directed the Institute for Sociology at HAS), that was followed by an impressive international recognition (professor at Stanford, the Bruges and Florence University Institutes).

**Elemér Hankiss:** Oh Lord! How did I end up in the field of sociology? In my young years as a literary historian I was engaged in literary theory. We had a team back then: we carried out the structuralist revolution in Hungary against traditional socialist literary theory, literary history writing; we claimed that history and biographies are superfluous and that the internal structures and internal systems of the artworks must be studied instead. Among other things, we analysed what value systems can be found in artworks, and the range of positive, negative and other values within them. And that was the moment when I started to contemplate why I was looking for these in certain works, and why not in society, in the human mind. Why I was looking for these in a reflection, in a secondary substance. And there was also the aspect that, even back then, questions which belonged to the field of philosophy arose in my mind. Since, on the one hand, I lacked an adequate philosophical background, and, on the other, I had been attacked by the party's ideologues, I had not really had the courage to engage in philosophical or ontological arguments. In effect I slowly tended towards literary psychology, ending up in the field of social psychology – in other words, sociology. I have always been interested in exclusively those fields of sociology which concern social consciousness. I once participated in a survey when we were organizing a sociological value survey. As a matter of fact, this was my primary profession for 15 years: we conducted surveys one after the other, partly co-operating with Americans and others. This way we tried to locate the values system of Hungarian society in international comparison. This was our main occupation: we called ourselves the Value Sociology Workshop. Róbert Manchin, now chairman and managing director of Gallup Europe, and another excellent person, Árpád Szakolczai, now professor of sociology at Cork University, were also in the group. Actually we three were the ones who worked on the surveys, with a lot of help and a great group of interviewers, from which a

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bunch of people emerged who are now notable scholars, such as László Bruszt, currently a professor at the European University Institute in Florence.

We wrote a large book, 600 pages in length, entitled *Continuity and Disruption*, in which we concluded that Hungarian society is more individual than American society. It is that, but in a very negative and bad way. We used the concept of negative individualization. A certain kind of selfishness, in contrast to responsible bourgeois individualism. When the book was complete, I took it to Magvető Kiadó;<sup>2</sup> three weeks later, early one morning, I realized there was a miscalculation in it. I requested for it to be returned, but we did not have the energy to fix it. So the book exists as a manuscript, but we never wrote the new edition, and it has never been published. Neither in Hungarian nor in English. And that was around the time that I got tired and sick of this “survey world”, because I found it extremely impersonal and inefficient as a method. There is a great need for this, we need to know what people think, how their health is, and therefore sociology cannot exist without surveys, but they involve a great amount of idle hours: until the surveys, methodology and the huge amount of encoding are prepared, we have to deal with an enormous amount of data for years and get next to nothing out of it. I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, because it has to be done, but doing this for 10-14 years was enough for me.

Then I started writing essays in social psychology or sociology, which were published first, if I recall correctly, in *Social Traps*<sup>3</sup>, then in *Diagnosis*<sup>4</sup> and the last part in *Diagnoses 2*<sup>5</sup>. In the 1990s I was living in the US where I wrote a book, entitled *Eastern European Alternatives*<sup>6</sup>, which summed up the ideas, utopias, plans and claims made by an intellectual reformist elite in Hungary in the 1980s. This is how I finished my sociological studies, or rather I returned to the topic in a book titled *New Diagnoses*<sup>7</sup>, and then in *Traps and Mice*<sup>8</sup> in 2009.

We can say that I lived a double life, because I wasn’t truly interested in Hungarian society or Eastern European problems from the 1990s onwards. Firstly because it was very popular, researched by scholars wiser than me, and secondly, I don’t know why, but lost interest in it. I started to orientate towards what was called *philosophical anthropology* by the Germans and now also by the Americans. The problems of human life on an empirical basis but in a philosophical sense. Arnold Gehler and Max Scheler started it, and because of this and many other things I started to become more interested in the place humans have in the world. [Questions such as] the meaning of life, how to deal with the fact that people are only a little, insignificant point in an endless universe, and how people can create their own world. This is

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<sup>2</sup> Hungarian publishing company

<sup>3</sup> Társadalmi csapdák. Magvető, Budapest 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Diagnózisok. Magvető, Budapest 1982.

<sup>5</sup> Diagnózisok 2. Magvető, Budapest 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Hankiss is almost certainly referring to the time spent at The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington DC (1987-88). The book had been published before his study visits in America (Stanford University, Georgetown University): Kelet-európai alternatívák, Budapest, Közgazdasági és Jog, 1989.; East European Alternatives. Clarendon, Oxford 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Új diagnózisok. Osiris, Budapest 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Csapdák és egerek. Magyarország 2009-ben – és tovább. Manager Budapest, 2009.

the problem of *building a human universe*, the idea of Peter Berger and others, the question of how can we create a human space in this endless and empty universe, a human shell, from symbols, religions, ideologies, art, science and institutions; a shell that makes us feel safe and says that there is freedom and that our lives are meaningful and have dignity. I told you that you won't hear a lot from me [about sociological profession] because I have left the field of sociology. I am a capricious person: I always dare to switch to new fields, which can be quite self-destructive because you cannot become a professor at Harvard if you change your field of interest three or four times in your life... You have to start studying cockchafers as a child to win a Nobel Prize at the age of 70 for it. One who switches fields a lot will not win a Nobel Prize, but it is more interesting.

**Máté Zombory:** *In one of your books you mention that there lies a certain kind of constant undercurrent beneath your different topics, after all.*

**EH:** Indeed. I wrote about this in my book *The Faces Of A Country*.<sup>9</sup> Now, as I slowly get closer to death, I have started to think about what I have done in the last hundred years and whether there is something that sums this whole thing up. And I found around three or four things. The first thing was being an outsider. I was living my happy childhood, biking across the pathways of Nagyerdő in Debrecen until I turned 16. I thought I was the king of the world in those days. Then the war broke out and our entire family was dragged into the depths, and from that moment on I considered the world, or life, as my mother called it, an alien world. I still feel this way. Not only personally, but I believe the whole of mankind lives in a very cold, alienated world in which it is very hard to live as a human being. It is really difficult to create our own human world. Becoming an outsider after the war was a big shock to me, and then the communist era came, in which I was considered completely excluded as a class enemy, and I was not able to achieve anything, as I had not been willing to participate in the party and other things. I had to work as an outsider, and I was treated as a "tolerated" person, even here [at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Sociology]. They took me in. First Iván Vitányi involved me in the work of the Institute for Popular Education, and then I got into the Institute for Literary Studies, by some lucky chance which I still don't understand. That is how I got here, to the Institute for Sociology, because I was getting more and more interested in sociology. But I was only a "tolerated" person here, too, so technically I was still an outsider: a dubious man who came from the outside with a troubled past, who had been imprisoned in '56, a man whose parents were bourgeois, a man who did not belong here. Then 1989 came and I was elected a member of the Presidency of State Television for two and a half years because we thought we had to do something for the country – it did not quite work out like that. I was never a member of any party, and I would be hated by one party because they thought that I belonged to the other one, and that other party thought the same about the first one. This kind of standing in-between amused me. I see it as a very important thing, but one pays a high price. A really high price.

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<sup>9</sup> Egy ország arcai: válogatott szociológiai írások, 1977-2012. L'Harmattan, Budapest 2012.

The second thing is the fact that I was a student at Eötvös, the secondary school, from 1948 to 1950, until I got kicked out. It was a fantastic place. It was modelled on the French *École Normale Supérieure* and it was a place for free thinking. French, English, American, German philosophical and sociological thinking, and all the natural sciences, physics. There we were together, all in one place, about fifty of us, all young men with excellent school records. We were taught to explore the secrets of the world. That you have to be at the top and try to discover the great secrets of existence. It went like this for many years, with a great library and wonderful teachers such as Dezső Keresztury, Domonkos Kosáry, Dezső Pais and János Horváth. And all of us thought that we were going to be the next Nobel Prize winners; we were raised like that.

The third thought is the wickedness of the world. The terrors of fake socialism are hard to bear. People have always wanted to deal with science; the question of secrets has always excited them the most. However, because of the everyday horrors – plenty of people suffered, a lot of our teachers went to prison, there were too many troubles – it was impossible not to focus on these problems and write about them. This is how I became a public figure, and entered the circle of the journal *Valóság*, and into the circle of the former version of another excellent journal entitled *Kritika*. They published several things which did not fit into socialism, but it was possible to write about many things in a metaphorical language. For example, every single word of the *Diagnoses* is against the system, but it was written in a way that made its publication possible. We made a contest out of writing things which were prohibited. The censorship was rather poor, full of loopholes. Many people felt that the world was wrong and we felt like we had to improve it. There was a great opportunity to do so. It was like dancing in the chains of socialism, but it was a useful dance. Telling the public what was wrong with the system and what should be done differently: it was a terribly strong driving force.

The fourth thing is the question of the reasons why – why we are doing all of this. Because it is obvious that we need to fight for everything, and especially against human suffering. However, there are plenty of pointless things in life. Human lives, 70-80 years pass by, and when one looks back after 70 years on what he has done, and says Jesus, life has passed by doing nothing. This was the fourth driving force, and this search for the meaning of life has become even more important for me in the last 15 years.

**MZ:** *You said that you were the ones who carried out the structuralist revolution. How did you first encounter structuralism?*

**EH:** Well, first I worked in foreign trade, and then, in 1953, I started to work at the Széchényi Library with Dezső Keresztury. This was when I started to explore the questions of structuralism, and to explore the internal processes of a work of art. Then somehow I made it to a conference abroad: they didn't take me off the train, which is what had usually happened before, but by some accident they didn't do so this time, so I was there, somewhere in Switzerland in the mid-1960s, where I met with Lajos Bíró, who was working at the Institute for Literary Studies at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He knew the Russian formalists

well. Some nights we took long walks and had great conversations. And then in six months he asked me to work for him on this basis. I was more than happy to do so, so I said yes, of course.

**MZ:** *Did you have any relationships with the structuralists?*

**EH:** Not personal ones. We read their works, but the Russian formalists were also very important. Scholars like Block and his colleagues, the people at the Tartu School, the Spanish and the Czechs. The Austrian formalist school was also extremely important. I would say Roman Jakobson was probably the most well-known figure, and Roland Barthes was the most famous French author.

**MZ:** *So it was not only about literature.*

**EH:** It was not only about literature, because structuralism had a powerful branch in anthropology, led by Lévi-Strauss, and it was also powerful in the history of art or music – for example, Iván Vitányi and his colleagues worked in the field of music as structuralists. Four or five of us formed a sort of travelling circus as structuralists; we met every week and learnt from each other. This kind of travelling circus included György Szépe, who died recently, Iván Vitányi, Vilmos Voigt, Endre Bojtár, Csaba Pléh (more or less) and myself. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák was also in the group, at a distance, and we went around the country and said very dangerous things which completely shocked literary historians, men and women, everyone. We had a lot of fun.

**MZ:** *Could you please share a memorable moment from the travelling circus?*

**EH:** Well, I once visited Lajos Kassák's widow—Lajos Kassák was blacklisted at that time. She was living somewhere in Óbuda, and she had plenty of pictures, catalogued, so I suggested we could make an exhibition based on the pictures. She was happy to do so, and we set out the pictures made by Kassák in one of the rooms of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and meanwhile we gave a speech on structuralism. In spite of the fact that we did not ask for permission, it took place without any trouble. Even though there was quite a crowd, the official literary historians were in a different world and did not really pay attention to the pictures. So we did things like this. Obviously, the fact that we were “structuralist villains” was already a sufficient reason for rebellion. We were sentenced, and I was personally convicted by a decree of the party. They called us “value nihilists”. Even though we had no idea what that meant exactly.

**MZ:** *What was the system's problem with structuralism?*

**HE:** They didn't like it at all, because it had neither a historical nor economic approach, so it was neither about the economy determining mental existence, nor about history determining literature, nor about literature as a document of history. It was neither about literature only representing human values nor about Hungarian literature in fact being propaganda about the socialist human. It was about there being no history, no humans, no socialism, and the work of art being an autonomous thing. And it was a huge idea, because at that time everything had to be seen as a determined historical moment. And this idea also carried a secondary meaning

which we could only say very carefully, namely that humans should become as autonomous as artworks have become. But the artwork is pre-existing, because it works under different rules from humans, society or history. The artwork is the fantastic, great victory of autonomy. It was a very important matter for us back then to have such timeless autonomous things while everyone was talking about socialism. For us, it was one of the anchors of freedom. So they just couldn't take that.

**ZM:** *What did you exactly mean when you said that you were attacked by the ideologues of the party?*

**HE:** Well, for example there was that decree of the party about me which was printed too. We were also attacked by the leaders of the party in newspapers. There were members of the party who attacked us, the class enemies and ideologically different and dangerous people, heavily and roughly. This was going on, and we were aware of it. The triple policy[prohibit-tolerate-support] of Aczél was already in existence in the late 60s and the 70s, and you had to make a decision [as to where you belonged]. There was a prohibited "democratic opposition", János Kis and others, and there was a "tolerated" and a "supported" group. The supported ones were Gyula Illyés, László Németh *et al*, while we were the tolerated ones, always on the edge of getting killed. Maybe it was not morally necessary at that time, but I felt like I wouldn't be able to live my life without having some effect on society if I believed that there is a chance to make things better. So I had to try to do what was possible, to tell the public, in a weird metaphoric language. This was one standpoint. Meanwhile the prohibited group was more courageous: they only wrote in samizdat and had no communication with the system at all. To be honest, even today, I still see myself as a "bridge man" because I cannot tolerate that, instead of thinking and trying to work together, the country is being ruined by the fights and the foolish hatred between the two main parties. We have to try to build bridges between them wherever possible. Maybe it is a mistake, but even today, I still believe in this.

**MZ:** *It is interesting that everyone who you worked with in this workshop is now living abroad.*

**EH:** Yes, it is.

**MZ:** *But you stayed. Is it a coincidence or how did it happen?*

**EH:** No, it was my stupidity. I was offered a scholarship abroad as early as 1948, but I was not allowed to leave; then I could have left in 1956 but I didn't, I don't even know why, because of family affairs. Later, when I was allowed to visit conferences abroad in the middle of the 60s, I could have stayed; I was invited to a lot of places, I was even invited to Harvard, but I didn't leave. It was a major disadvantage, because, although some serious work was being conducted in Hungary, we lived in an intellectual wasteland. There were small workshops doing excellent things, but a significant part of the philosophers practised Marxism, which I think was completely sterile. The others tried to do good and different

things, for example the book of Szelényi and Konrád,<sup>10</sup> which was written around that time, but it was the exception. So the intellectual fizz, which if I would have left... I had the chance to go to Paris and America. One could have heard a lot of great scholars in Paris back then: Adorno was still alive, Horkheimer, Foucault and everyone who mattered was there, Lévi-Strauss and others. Or in America, at a good university, for example Stanford or Yale, we could have got into the trends of modern thinking. We heard of it from a huge distance. And we lived in a more or less intellectually anaemic milieu, which was a great misfortune. So, in this way, it was a bad decision not to emigrate. But it also had its advantages. The advantage was that everything was a matter of life and death here. If I had emigrated to America I would now be sitting here, talking about the same things, perhaps an overweight professor at Harvard, riding my high horse with my accent; I would be talking to you very decently and politely, but with condescension in my voice. Or, on the contrary, I would exaggerate our equality. Here in Hungary we had to take responsibility for every single sentence we wrote. It was not possible to reach extraordinary heights and write beautiful things, no. Every single sentence had its social significance. It was an enormous advantage. So, in fact, our existential thoughts deepened, but we didn't have enough time and knowledge to deepen our scholarly thoughts; we didn't have the intellectual atmosphere in which to write world-class things, which was a very big problem. There were a few exceptions, but they were extremely rare. The other thing is that we lived in constant fear, and always felt we needed to do something for society. So when one started work at home in the morning and the news came at noon that something terrible had happened again, it was a must to write something, to write a public article, and a lot of time was spent writing these articles for *Valóság* and many other great journals. These were quite important things; if only it would still be possible to write these! Later in the 70s, radio programmes were sometimes allowed, too. So, staying in Hungary had both its advantages and disadvantages. Looking back on this, I should have left in 1956 at the latest; I could have achieved more in my academic career.

**ZM:** *Could you also tell me about being in prison? You mentioned it several times earlier.*

**HE:** It might be related to sociology in the sense that I met Pista Kemény there [in 1956]. I have to say that prison was good both personally and professionally — it was a useful challenge to see if you are able to hang on. When they took me in, early in the morning, I was shaking with fear. I was wondering what was about to happen – the rumours were terrifying. Although we were hiding, they caught us. They didn't beat us; it was just the psychological torture that went on for three or four months. It was not only you being tortured; it was watching how your cellmates were treated. That was terrible. Sometimes their fear of death was worse than your own. Yeah, they were facing horrible sentences. The prison was good for seeing what you are able to bear. I mean, to see if you are able to act like you write, like a man should act. I can't claim that, if I had been physically tortured, I would have been able to keep it together, but I can tell you one thing: I was able to bear a wide range of psychological torture. It is useful to try it, to challenge yourself that you are able not just to speak but to

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<sup>10</sup> George Konrad and Ivan Szelényi: *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power. A Sociological Study of the Role of the Intelligentsia in Socialism*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, NYC, 1979.

stand up for your thoughts. Looked at like this, it was useful from an academic perspective as well. That's all. The rest is not worth telling.

**ZM:** *Why not?*

**HE:** Because these are like stories from the battlefield: we are just not interested.

**ZM:** *All right. But I would like you to tell me more about István Kemény.*

**HE:** I don't even know if I had known him before prison. I knew who he was, but I don't think I had met him personally. We were both smiling awkwardly and shrugging that we are here. We talked a lot, but it went on for no more than a couple of weeks, as we were then separated, and completely different kinds of people were put next to me, or I was put next to others. It was there that our intellectual connection evolved. He told me about his research on poverty, which he was already engaged in. At that time I was still a literary theorist. I heard from him for the first time how exciting it is to look into society – especially the lower layers of society and their problems. So poverty as a shocking basic problem: he explained it to me for the first time in my life, and this became an important introduction for me. We often met later during the research, and we met several times in Paris after he defected. So there was quite an intense intellectual connection between us. I think that as a sociologist he was smiling at my amateur attempts at the subject. If I had been him, I would have smiled at what I was trying to do.

**ZM:** *You said earlier that you got tired of the survey world. How did you manage to get out of that world?*

**HE:** Let me tell you something about the shift from literary theory to sociology. One book of mine in the field of literary theory was entitled *A népdaltól az abszurd drámáig*.<sup>11</sup> It was full of literary analysis. I studied how it had been possible to put so much information into the 3-verse poem called *Októberi táj* by Dezső Kosztolányi that, when someone reads it, the vision of an autumn landscape comes to life. I was doing this because the poem has a rich inner structure of rhymes, rhythm, sounds and symbols. It has a terrific structure. In another paper I was studying who the addressee of the poem was. I looked at whom poems, Hungarian and not Hungarian ones, were addressing. The connection between the poet and their addressed audience is a relation which has a social aspect. I have a paper entitled *A halál és a happy ending*.<sup>12</sup> It is about the catharsis of tragedies. My doctoral dissertation, *Az irodalmi mű mint komplex modell*,<sup>13</sup> has a long chapter about this effect. How does literature have an effect? This is where the social aspect comes into the picture. We also analysed the structure of the values of the poems in a structuralist way. We looked for example at the way in which positive and negative experiences shift from one moment to the next in O'Neill's plays. Happiness–unhappiness, hope–hopelessness, relationship–nothingness, meaning–

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<sup>11</sup> *A népdaltól az abszurd drámáig*. Tanulmányok. Magvető, Budapest 1969.

<sup>12</sup> *Érték és társadalom*. Tanulmányok az értékszociológia köréből. Magvető, Budapest 1977. 203-231.

<sup>13</sup> *Az irodalmi mű mint komplex modell*. Tanulmány. Magvető, Budapest 1985.



meaninglessness. If you look at it, there is no paragraph that doesn't have at least one or two shifts. This is the shifting of values. Basically, human values are very important.

And then I got to know some psychologists, became familiar with their circle, and started wondering whether it was time to check – not by interpreting literary works, but directly – the pulsing of values in society, the human material. How does this structure of values come to form in the human brain? This is why the brilliant László Füstös was significant: thanks to him, we made three-dimensional maps of values using modern methods. We tinkered with sticks and balls for days or weeks to distinguish the exact distance between each value. And from – plus I had already published similar studies before – I could deduce the kinds of dimensional shifts that exist. If you tell me that “the king sits in the carriage”, then it is a simple case. But if you say that “the queen sits in a coal cart”, then there we find a dimensional shift. And there are plenty of similar shifts in literature and also in people's brains, especially now, as I am reading about quantum mechanics – there are fantastically interesting things in that. The oscillation. That there are real values in each literary work I have reviewed. To what end is there oscillation between different values, primarily between ontological dimensions? Existence and non-existence, time and timelessness, moving and standing still, life and death, beautiful and ugly. Oscillation is permanent. This pulsing, this oscillation is the source of beauty. And this is what I look for in dramas, poems and novels as well. And this is why I left the field of literary theory: because the oscillation was so thrilling, so philosophical, that I would have had to change to philosophy, which I did not know anything about – and could not, because the comrades were at my throat as it was. They did not allow it; this would have been such a capital sin in the zhdanovist world that it simply couldn't be done. And I wouldn't have dared, either. Later, in my last book, I tried to create the philosophy of this, too. But I would have needed to work on it all my life to do so, because it connects to – you will laugh – physics. Well, at least I hope so; I was too lazy to sit down to discuss it with physicists, but they are the ones who use the word ‘oscillation’. The idea of oscillation is essential and I have to get together with them sooner or later to work out whether these two types of oscillation – physical and conscious – have any common ground.

Therefore I started to research the sense of value in society, partly via these surveys, and partly in *Diagnosis* studies. But I will give you another example. We conducted experiments like the waste container experiment, which is quite often discussed but not that important. We had an outstanding Austrian colleague here and we started a conversation about social traps, which we were not aware of before. He talked for hours. Later I read up on this and wrote a booklet about social traps. One of these traps is about cars heading home on a Sunday evening. The highway is full and everyone is on edge. A deckchair falls off the top of a car, blocking the traffic, but everyone avoids it instead of stopping and getting it out of the way, even though it would not take much effort to do so. The lonely hero is missing. Everyone is impatient, they won't wait anymore. If one of them stopped, the others would crash into them, so why should they be the one? There is no lonely hero. We repeated it in Pest. We put a waste container out on in the middle of Szép Street, went into an apartment with a camera-crew, and filmed what happened from a balcony. The container was there and the cars avoided it continuously. And everyone who watches the video says how great it is that in the

end a young man came and dragged it away. He was not a driver, but at least someone pulled it away. This runs as a heroic story nowadays, but that's not how it happened. The young man came out, lifted the bin and ran away with it. He stole it. It's not a problem, though: the situation was solved. It was possible to fill a short booklet with such things, because we knew –from the specialist literature –that these are important, and we wanted to enrich the book with experiments like this one.

**MZ:** *Social Traps and Diagnoses were a big hit. You found a voice which works very well. Yet you have just claimed that in the 1990s you became less and less interested in Hungarian society and Eastern European narratives. You wrote East European Alternatives, you went to the United States of America, and then it seems like this represented an end to something.*

**EH:** It is a great question, because I don't know the answer. As a matter of fact there was a serious change in 1995-96. I was at Georgetown University, Washington DC.<sup>14</sup> It was hard work. There was frenzied rivalry between the people there. Besides me there were two other Eastern Europeans. While Eastern European problems were in focus at one of my seminars at the university, there was already a seminar on the problem of freedom. What crossed my mind in connection with Eastern Europe, as we used to call it back then, is the ironic freedom of Eastern Europeans: this was, in point of fact, more a concept analysis; a concept analysis in the field of the history of science, or a concept analysis in the field of the history of ideas. My seminar at Stanford was again on this, the question of freedom; the other was on the change of Western civilization over the past fifty years. In the field of sociology, and especially in the field of political science, very few sets of variables can be studied in academic papers. And a question like the question of freedom is so complex that an interplay among dozens of variables must be analysed. And I was more interested in that. And the change of an entire civilization in a few decades is even more complex. There are such interesting connections in it, it started to intrigue me more and more. And, in effect, even from here, I moved forward in my book, *The Human Adventure*.<sup>15</sup> Yes, I was at Stanford for a year with a scholarship, at the best place in the world: the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. It is next to the university, up in the hills, in a beautiful place. And a lot of psychologists, historians, and all kinds of real intellectuals were there, with whom we always had lunch, and there was such effervescence, such a surge of thoughts, that the first version of *The Human Adventure* was written actually there, due to this ambience, and only in part by myself. This was when I discovered so-called philosophical anthropology. Here, in fact, I was no longer that interested in the processes and the structure of society, but rather in the questions of human life. This obviously correlates with age and ageing too. Or with the fact that this is what has always intrigued me. It was only overlaid by layers which let this seep through, and these allowed me to move towards thinking about this, to dig deep. *The Human Adventure* is specifically about how people, humankind and human cultures, form their symbolic protective layer in which the illusion of freedom, equality and justice can be found. A certain kind of security, freedom,

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<sup>14</sup> The presentations of the conference organized in 1995 were published cf. Elemér Hankiss (ed.) *Europe After 189: A Culture in Crisis?* (Ed.). Georgetown University, Washington 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Az emberi kaland. Egy civilizáció-elmélet vázlata. Helikon, Budapest 1997.

as well as the hope that our lives have a meaning, that we have a role in the world. And, well, I'm still stuck on this. In my last book, already published, *A Nincsből a Van felé*,<sup>16</sup> the question is the same. In it, the questions regarding the possibility or impossibility of finding the meaning of human existence are more direct. I have already left the field of sociology behind.

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<sup>16</sup> *A Nincsből a Van felé. Gondolatok az élet értelméről* (From There Is Not to There Is. Thoughts on the Meaning of Human Existence). Osiris, Budapest, 2012.